DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 221 492 SP 020 976

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TITLE Evaluating Trainees in the Counseling Practicum.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Colloquium of the Council of Graduate Students in Education (1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counselor Educators; *Counselor Evaluation; Counselor Performance; *Counselor Training; *Evaluation Methods; Higher Education; Informal Assessment; *Interpersonal Competence; *Student Evaluation

ABSTRACT

A study was made to determine the procedures which supervisors and instructors of counseling practica currently use to evaluate the counseling effectiveness of masters and doctoral level practicum students. Inquiry was also made about the solutions adopted when a student is considered ineffective. The survey elicited responses from 89 individuals, most of whom served in the dual capacities of practicum intructors and individual supervisors, and represented a broad range of counseling approaches. The survey questions pertained to: (1) formal and informal assessment procedures in practica; (2) strategies for dealing with trainees whose counseling was evaluated as incompetent or ineffective; and (3) the relative importance of certain aspects of trainee professional development. Over half of the respondents indicated that trainees were graded on a pass/fail basis. The respondents indicated that they used indirect and subjective methods of student evaluation, such as audio- or video-taped counseling sessions, observation of student attitudes and behavior in supervision, and student self-reports of progress with clients. In response to a question on how they dealt with students who were rated as unsatisfactory, most indicated that these trainees were given "incompletes" and offered some type of remedial experience to assist them in developing skills in their areas of deficiency. Most of the respondents checked more than one option which they used in handling ineffective trainees. Over half of the respondents ranked counseling interview skills as the most important aspect of professional development for their practicum students. (JD)

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EVALUATING TRAINEES IN THE COUNSELING PRACTICUM

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SP 020 976

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ABSTRACT

A six-item survey was developed to investigate: (1) the data which counseling practicum instructors and supervisors consider when evaluating counselor-trainee competency and (2) methods of dealing with trainees who do not perform satisfactorily in their counseling. Results indicate that although instructors/supervisors consider several sources of evidence when assessing trainees, they tend to rely most heavily on "soft" evaluation data -- data which are gathered indirectly and/or which is subjective in nature. When confronted with students who do not perform at a minimal level of effectiveness by the end of their practicum experience, instructors/supervisors most often provide some form of remedial experience.

During the past several years, there has been a substantial increase in research pertaining to the counseling practicum and the concomitant supervisory experience (Hansen, Pound, & Petro, 1976). Much of this research has focused on the role of the supervisor and on specific procedures used in training counselors. In addition, some attention has also been directed to the issue of evaluation of practicum students (e.g., Borman & Ramirez, 1975; Brown & Cannady, 1969; Trotzer, 1976). The vast majority of studies on evaluation have examined comparisons among different groups of raters such as supervisors, clients, and trainees themselves. While this body of research responds to the question of who should evaluate counselor-trainees, the questions of what should be evaluated and how have been virtually ignored.

With issues of accountability and credentialing gaining increasing attention from both professionals and the public (Carr, 1977; Carrol, Halligan, & Griggs, 1977; Forster, 1977; Knapper, 1978; Miller & Engin, 1976), many counselor education programs are moving toward competency-based training and evaluation (Bernstein & LeCompte, 1976; Brammer & Springer, 1971; Dash, 1975; Horan, 1972; Jones & Dayton, 1977; Kennedy, 1976). Dash (1975) states that "there is a growing practice nationally to examine counselor training and education from the standpoint of the mastery of skills and competencies" (p. 221) and further expresses that "outcomes of training must be written and evaluated in observable, measurable terms" (p. 224).

In the meantime, while the criteria for counselor competency and effectiveness remain unclear, many counselor educators continue to struggle with deciding the bases upon which to make their evaluations of counselor-trainee effectiveness.

The purpose of this study was to determine: (1) the procedures which counseling practicum instructors and supervisors currently use to evaluate the counseling effectiveness of their practicum students and (2) the solutions they adopt when a student is not performing at an acceptable level of effectiveness.

PROCEDURE

A six-item survey designed by the investigator to determine the methods which are presently employed to evaluate the counseling effectiveness of masters and doctoral level practicum students was mailed to 136 practicum instructors and/or supervisors around the country. Their names and addresses were obtained from the 22 directors of training of all of the full-approved APA Counseling Psychology programs as of 1979. Eighty nine of 136, or approximately 65% of the practicum instructors/supervisors who were contacted, returned completed surveys (47% following initial contact; an additional 18% on follow-up). At least one and as many as 11 completed surveys were obtained from each of the programs which were included in this study. Although the survey was originally intended only for practicum instructors, several directors of training informed the investigator that their programs did not

have a formal class or group designated as a practicum and that their trainees were thus assigned directly to individual supervisors. Of the 89 respondents, 52 (56%) were serving in the dual capacities of practicum instructors and individual supervisor. Twenty-four respondents (27%) were serving only as individual supervisors, whereas 13 (15%) were serving only as practicum instructors. Nearly half (49%) of the practicum instructors/supervisors described their counseling approaches as eclectic, and the remainder responded with: (1) cognitive/rational emotive (17%); (2) psychodynamic/analytic (10%); (3) client-centered/existential (9%); (4) behavioral (6%); (5) systems/family (5%); and (6) gestalt/t.a. (4%).

The survey specifically asked questions pertaining to: (1) formal and informal assessment procedures in practicum; (2) strategies for dealing with trainees whose counseling is evaluated as incompetent or ineffective; and (3) the relative importance of three aspects of trainee professional development.

RESULTS

Practicum instructors and supervisors were first polled concerning the manner in which their practicum students are formally evaluated at the end of the academic term. Fifty-three of the 89 respondents (60%) indicated that trainees are graded on a pass/fail or satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis, whereas 32 (36%) employ a traditional grading system (A, B, C, D, F). In addition, 10% of the respondents stated that they also complete a formal, written evaluation on each student at the end of the term.

Sources of evidence which are considered by instructors/supervisors when evaluating the counseling performance and effectiveness of trainees are listed in rank order by popularity in Table 1. Nearly all of the respondents (91%) indicated that they use critique of audio- or videotaped counseling sessions to evaluate the effectiveness of their trainees. Observation of the student's attitudes and behavior in supervision, student self-reports of progress with clients, and student contributions to practicum were each considered as sources of evidence by over 75% of the respondents. Less frequently used evidence in assessing trainee effectiveness are number of client "no shows", supervisor ratings on formal instruments which measure interviewing/counseling effectiveness, and client's ratings on formal instruments which measure perceptions of or satisfaction with their counselor (each less than 20%). Practicum instructors/supervisors nearly always consider several sources of information when assessing trainee effectiveness. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents checks four or more methods by which they evaluate trainees, and 55% checked six or more.

Recipients of the survey were also asked how they deal with students who fail to demonstrate evidence of effective counseling by the end of their practicum experience. As indicated in Table 2, the largest number of respondents marked that these trainees are given "incompletes" and are offered some type of remedial experience to assist them in developing skills in their areas of deficiency. The least endorsed method of handling this type of situation is to pass

the student in practicum while strongly advising him or her to pursue professional activities other than face-to-face counseling. Again, most of the respondents checked more than one option which they might elect to use in handling trainees who fail to perform adequately.

Finally, instructors/supervisors were asked to rank the relative importance of three aspects of professional development for their practicum students. Over half of the respondents (53%) ranked adequacy of counseling interview skills as most important. Thirty-one percent ranked personal growth and maturity as most important, and 16% indicated that ability to conceptualize cases well is of primary importance.

DISCUSSION

Results from this survey suggest that practicum instructors and supervisors generally utilize a wide variety of evidence when assessing the counseling effectiveness of their trainees. This finding lends credence to a comment made by Bernstein and LeCompte (1976) that " .... the achievement of specified objectives (in practicum) is more likely to be measured through feedback by multiple observers (and multiple methods) than through evaluation by only one source" (p. 33). The response options provided by the survey relative to evidence considered when assessing trainee effectiveness can be viewed as falling into one of two categories: (1) evidence which is gathered indirectly and/or which is subjective in nature, and (2) evidence which is gathered directly and/or which is objective in nature. Evidence which

might be considered indirect/subjective are: students' self-reports, students' contribution to practicum, observation of student in supervision, feedback from students' peers, and feedback from other counselor education faculty. Conversely, evidence which might be viewed as direct/objective are: critique of taped counseling sessions, critique of live sessions, supervisor ratings on formal instruments, client ratings on formal instruments, objective measures of client improvement, and number of client "no shows." Judging from the number of responses to each of the 11 evidence options, practicum instructors and supervisors strongly endorse only one form of direct/objective evaluation--critique of taped sessions. Objective measures of client improvement, number of client "no shows," supervisor ratings on formal instruments, and client ratings on formal instruments--all direct/objective methods of assessment--are the least popular sources of data for assessing trainee competency. In general, practicum instructors and supervisors tend to rely more heavily on indirect/subjective evidence when evaluating the counseling effectiveness of practicum trainees. The continued reliance on "soft" evaluation data provides some indication that although many counselor educators may be accepting the idea of competency-based evaluation, they are not yet broadly implementing this form of assessment.

Regardless of which evaluation methods or criteria instructors/supervisors use to determine the counseling effectiveness of trainees, eventually they confront the problem of dealing with a trainee who is not performing satisfactorily in his or her counseling. Results

from this survey suggest that practicum instructors/supervisors generally prefer to give the skill-deficient trainee another chance or additional help rather than assigning him or her a failing grade in practicum. Nonetheless, a sizeable group of respondents do consider failure of the practicum course a viable option. Interestingly, the number of respondents who indicated that they would pass the trainee but urge him or her to examine other career alternatives was nearly as high as those who indicated that they might fail the trainee. It is this author's contention that giving highly skill-deficient trainees a passing grade in practicum while hoping that they will "self-select" into other careers is an ineffective way of controlling the quality of service provided by helping professionals. The fact is that counselor educators exercise virtually no control over what trainees do professionally once they graduate from their training programs.

The results of this survey provide a glimpse of current evaluation practices in counseling practice. Although practicum instructors and supervisors generally utilize a number of methods for evaluating trainee effectiveness, many of the more commonly used procedures appear to be relatively indirect and subjective. In addition, a sizable number of instructors/supervisors continue to assign passing grades to practicum students who are known to be ineffective counselors. The question of accountability cannot be set aside until a counselor enters professional practice (Walton & Sweeney, 1969). According to Knapper (1978), ".... the counselor educator has a responsibility to help protect the integrity of the

profession and insure the welfare of the general public" (p. 28). Counselor educators who are willing to accept this responsibility must first reconcile their dual roles of facilitator and evaluator and then progress toward developing greater proficiency in their ability to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of their trainees. Moreover, proficiency in evaluation can only be accomplished by clearly defining training objectives which state specifically which behaviors and attitudes trainees must acquire as a result of practicum training.

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Table 1

Evidence Considered by Practicum Instructors/Supervisors When Assessing Counselor-Trainee Effectiveness

Evidence	No. of Respondents (of 89 total)	% of Respondents	Rank
Critique of taped sessions	81	91	1
Observation of student in supervision	77	87	2
Students' self-reports	72	81	3
Students' contributions to practicum	68	76	4
Critique of live sessions	50	56	5
Feedback from students' peers	31	35	6
Feedback from other counselor education faculty	30	34	7
Objective measures of client improvement	23	26	8
Number of client "no shows"	14	16	9.5
Supervisor ratings on formal instruments	14	16	9.5
Client ratings on formal instruments	11	12	11

Note. Recipients of the survey were advised to check all response alternatives which applied to them.

Table 2

Options Used to Deal with Counselor-Trainees Who Fail to Demonstrate Evidence of Effective Counseling

Options	No. of Respondents (of 89 total)	% of Respondents	Rank
Give student an "incomplete" and offer remedial experience	62	70	1
Require student to re-enroll in practicum	51	57	2
Fail student in the practicum course	34	38	3
Pass student but urge him/her to examine other career alternatives	29	33	4

Note. Recipients of the survey were advised to check all response alternatives which applied to them.